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Next 6 Page(s) In Document Denied

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KEYS TO THE SOVIET POLICY PUZZLE

1. Soviet policy toward the US has retreated into a state of deep-freeze paralysis which is very hard to understand purely in terms of foreign policy calculation. Although they too are very hard to decypher, domestic and leadership politics almost certainly have a lot to do with the peculiarly counterproductive quality of current Soviet foreign policies. On balance, the domestic political factor probably acts to reduce the likelihood of a dangerous foreign policy initiative.

2. Soviet propaganda against the US continues to be unusually vituperative. The Soviets maintain an absolutely uncooperative stance on the major arms control topics. Their handling of the Olympics and Sakharov has taken on the quality of irrational nastiness, gaining them nothing and probably costing them with audiences they most want to impress, especially in Europe and the US public. Until recently, some Western commentators tended to blame the USG for Soviet behavior. But this is now beginning to change under the impact of the Sakharov case.

3. Meanwhile, the Soviets are missing what could be tempting opportunities for them to take the initiative. Although they would certainly see risks from a more forward posture in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, they could make relatively cheap political mileage at low risk by simply being more active diplomatically and clever propagandistically.

4. The Soviets are engaged in some sort of pressure game in Berlin. But they are playing their hand with such enigmatic diffidence that we hardly hear whatever signal may be intended. There is fairly convincing evidence that the Cubans and, presumably, the Soviets are aiming for an offensive in El Salvador timed to impact on the November elections. In no other area, however, do Soviet actions appear to match the belligerent quality of Soviet rhetoric. The Soviets are talking fiercely, but doing rather little.

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6. For a time, perhaps into mid-spring, one could argue that Soviet deep-freeze diplomacy had a basis in rational calculation.

[] this diplomacy was no doubt expected to spook Western governments into new concessions and exploitable gestures. But this has not worked so far. Indeed, there is some evidence that by mid-December of last year, when Andropov still exerted a significant influence in the Politburo, the Soviet leadership was toying with a shift to a more flexible policy. But they clearly reverted to the deep-freeze line.

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7. The role of Gromyko is surely part of this story...but only part. Chernenko's weakness, the uncertainty of political line-ups on the Politburo, and Gromyko's technical expertise have given the doughty foreign minister a power over Soviet policy he hasn't enjoyed in 30 years. But power has not given him a facility for strategic conception and tactical agility; he remains a mechanic skilled largely in the arts of stubbornness. Moreover, he is currently presiding over a policy toward the West that has largely spent itself, if not failed. He probably senses political challenge from the professional security establishment, deepening his mood of truculence and defensiveness.

8. Gromyko's personal authority alone probably does not account for the current foreign policy. He certainly has allies in Ustinov and perhaps others in the leadership. But we have no real evidence that the Politburo is divided into a Gromyko-Ustinov hard-line faction against another group which might favor more flexible policies.

9. The key to the puzzle appears to be that the senior Soviet leadership as a whole -- Chernenko, Ustinov, Gromyko, and Tikhonov -- is seized with a political agenda that is more inward-looking than it has been for many years. Hanging on to their own positions is clearly a major preoccupation for all of them. Chernenko's accession and behavior since February indicate that his assigned, if perhaps not preferred, role is to stabilize, reassure, and even tranquilize on all sides.

10. Such a performance from the General Secretary seems addressed to what is going on in the larger political elite. Political commentaries in the Soviet press on a variety of sensitive themes -- from "contradictions" in Soviet society, to party unity, to the telltale matter of "generational" tensions -- indicate all is not well in the Soviet ruling establishment. Some voices in that establishment are clearly calling for greater political activism in addressing the deeper problems of the Soviet system, and within the party itself. Nikita S. Khrushchev, who was deposed for excessive rattling of the oligarchical cages, was implicitly praised in a recent article after 20 years as a virtual non-person. Apart from the oldest members of the Politburo, the majority of the Soviet elite probably believe that no real policy initiatives can take place until the oldest of the old guard leave the scene.

11. This political state of affairs -- uncertain paralysis at the center against a backdrop of systemic internal problems -- makes foreign affairs generally, including US-Soviet relations, less central to the actual agenda of the Soviet leadership than the Western observer might wish or expect. The structure of Chernenko's recent speeches reveals that his priorities are very much at home. He is trying his best to persuade an increasingly skeptical clientele that the Brezhnev domestic formula of exhortation, super-cautious experimentation, and tight political control at the center will somehow carry the day. His anodyne allusions to the "dangerous international situation" are perfunctory and designed more to support internal exhortations than to send foreign policy signals.

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12. Current Soviet behavior toward the US may not make the best policy sense in terms of known Soviet objectives abroad. But it would seem to make political sense in terms of the domestic and leadership scene. In a word, it tends to keep the world at arm's length, postponing difficult strategic and tactical decisions, while sustaining a propaganda atmosphere of embattlement conducive to the survival of the old guard.

13. This interpretation suggests that major Soviet foreign policy initiatives in the direction flexibility on arms control or regional security issues, or even just to improve the atmosphere, are not probable in the near future. It also suggests that the Soviet leadership is not at present out looking for trouble, even though it would like to see the policies of the US discredited and modified. A further implication is that a change in the Soviet Politburo constellation is required for a significant change in Soviet foreign policy.

14. There remains a constant and worrisome danger that the present Soviet leadership situation is more than usually prone to miscalculation, to spastic reaction, or to "macho behavior" arising from internal political compulsions. This danger bears the most vigilant watching in the months ahead. A second, somewhat longer-term, danger is that the present Soviet stance of impotent fulmination against the US could create political conditions that would compel a slightly rejuvenated, more decisive Soviet leadership to take more aggressive and risky initiatives, of the sort that some in the national security bureaucracy may now be recommending.

15. But the more probable pattern of Soviet behavior in the near term is continuation of the diplomatic deep freeze without risky action. The old men in the Kremlin seem to believe that this cryogenic treatment of the outside world will help extend their own political lives. They are probably very conscious of a lesson that repeatedly emerges from Russian and Soviet history: Nothing is politically more deadly than an international adventure mishandled. To be charged with missing historic opportunities is a lesser indictment, since they won't be around to face the music.

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